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ABSTRACT

Although critics persist in attacks on the teaching profession in general and the teaching of reading in particular, both elementary and secondary school reading scores have increased steadily over the past three decades. Even Black and Hispanic students (who still score below the averages for White students tested) have made sizeable gains in reading scores over a 13-year span. The challenge is to make reading achievement even better, not as a response to the critics, but rather because research has allowed the improvement of teaching methods directly translatable into student reading achievement. Research in the direct teaching of reading skills has led to a six-step teaching process--introduction, instruction, guided practice, summary, independent practice, and application--that has significantly increased comprehension. The study of vocabulary development and the teaching of "meaning vocabulary" have shed light on how children learn to read, and teachers' use of schemata enhances meaning for students. Research also suggests that teachers should help students become better at making inferences as they read. As research on all these areas continues to influence daily teaching practices, reading achievement will grow even more. (NKA)

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Failing Schools: Weighing the Evidence, Responding to the Challenge

William K. Durr

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FAILING SCHOOLS: WEIGHING THE EVIDENCE, RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE

William K. Durr

Although attacks on our profession seem to have diminished, there is enough residue left from previous attacks to arm our critics for the next decade. We are justified in questioning these critics' conclusions, since truly objective people who examine all the evidence in their biting books and ridiculing reports about education are as rare as a cat with insomnia.

I believe that, as with many components of our lives, we are neither as professionally bad as some people say we are nor as good as we want to become.

Weighing the evidence

To paraphrase Ed McMahon as he sets up Johnny Carson, how - bad - are - we in teaching reading? In examining the evidence, we can begin by going back to the early 1950's as reported in the book *Reading Achievement in the United States: Then and Now* (Farr, Tuinman, and Rowls, 1974). An impressive analysis of research is summarized with this conclusion:

> The most conclusive statement that can be made is that the children of today [that is, 1974] are reading better (or at least scoring higher in tests) than children of 20 or more years ago. Moreover, these differences appear to be significant.

Now, let us move closer to the present and look at the results of other comparative scores on reading tests (Stedman and Kaestle, 1985). Students in grades 9 through 12 were tested in 1978 on the SRA test and their scores were compared with other students from 1971 who had been in the same grades. These high school students showed a grade equivalent drop of up to one year between tests in 1971 and 1978. But, before we don a scarlet *A* for *Awful*, we need to look at the real scores behind these differences. Oscar Buros and others have contended that grade-equivalents can give a misleading impression of skill levels and argued for using the percentages of items answered correctly as one way of noting actual student performance. On this test, the percentages answered correctly dropped only from 72% correct to 68% correct. We wish they had gone up, but a drop of only 4 percentage points hardly seems grounds for sending teachers to the guillotine.

Since one study and/or one test may not give the final answer, here are some other comparative scores. A study using the Stanford Achievement Test compared eighth-grade students and eleventh-grade students in 1982 with students in those same grades in 1973. The 1982 eighth-

graders scored 7 percentile points higher in reading than the 1973 students and the 1982 eleventh-graders scores 10 percentile points higher in reading than the 1973 students.

Another report from the Psychological Corporation covered grades seven through ten. On the Metropolitan and Stanford Tests between 1973 and 1978 there was a gain of five to six months in average reading achievement for the 1978 students over the 1973 students.

As we move to lower grade levels and closer to the present, we find a study using the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and covering grades three through eight. A comparison of 1984 student scores with 1977 student scores showed that scores rose dramatically over that seven-year period. A preliminary analysis of the 1984 results indicates that composite scores are at an all-time high for most grades.

The results of the most recent comparison of reading scores made by the National Assessment of Educational Progress covers the years 1971 through 1984 and was reported in *Reading Today* (1985/86). The NAEP tests nine-year-olds, thirteen-year-olds, and seventeen-year-olds. The tests are partially designed to measure changes over the years and, for this reason, may be the best measures for comparisons.

There are many conclusions that may be drawn from these NAEP data, but two seem most appropriate for our purposes. First, all three age groups have shown reading gains between 1971 and 1984. Second, although Black and Hispanic students are still below the averages for white students tested, these minority groups made sizeable gains over this thirteen-year span.

What do these test results mean when we pull them together? It seems that even a confirmed critic must conclude that the overwhelming evidence shows that reading test scores have gone up over the last three decades and the trend is still up. Any other conclusion would be, just as it was twelve years ago, ". . . at best unscholarly and at worst dishonest" (Farr, Tuinman, and Rowls, 1974).

Responding to the challenge

But the critics' comeback could be, "Scores may be going up, but they haven't gone up as much as they should." Here, we might be able to reach some common ground. We have just seen that we are not as bad as some people say we are, but, at the same time, we are not as good as we want to become. And this relates to the second part of our title: responding to the challenge.

What is the challenge? I believe that the challenge has little to do with our critics. The real challenge comes from within ourselves, not from outside. As teachers of reading, our inner challenge is to become even better at what we are already doing pretty well and there is evidence that we will successfully respond to that challenge in the very near future.

The major reason that we will do so comes from the explosion of sound research that has taken place in the past half-dozen years on how to improve our teaching methods. While today's research has its roots in earlier studies, the conclusions that are growing from them are now receiving wide recognition. As we translate this research into classroom teaching practices, this explosion of research will translate into an explosion in reading achievement for our students.

Let's look at just four of these areas of research in which marked instructional changes are taking place — changes that will result in even greater student reading growth.

Direct teaching

One area deals with the direct teaching of reading skills, particularly reading comprehension skills, that has been summarized by Baumann (1983), Pearson (1985), and others. This research in direct teaching leads to a six-step teaching process that has proved to significantly increase reading comprehension.

1. Introduction: The teacher tells students what they are going to learn, why they are going to learn it, and how this new skill relates to previous skills they have mastered.

2. Instruction: In step two, the teacher shows, tells, models, explains, demonstrates, *teaches* the skill. For example, when teaching students how to get the main idea of a paragraph, the teacher may model for students how he or she gets the main idea, explaining the mental processes and steps in doing so. There is also evidence that greater comprehension abilities are achieved when the initial instruction involves students learning the skill through a listening activity and then translating this to reading (Seaton & Wielan, 1981).

3. Guided Practice: The key word in this step is *guided.* After students have gained a beginning understanding of the skill through direct teacher instruction, they are guided through using this skill in a reading activity — explaining the steps they use as they go and receiving corrective instruction when it is needed.

4. Summary: Students orally summarize, in their own words, their understandings of the skill they have just practiced.

5. Independent Practice: Now that direct instruction, guided practice, and student summarizing have insured that students can use the skill, independent practice on their own helps them fix the skill in their minds for greater retention.

6. Application: On a subsequent day, students are reminded of the skill they have learned and asked to use it in a "real life" reading situation, thus transferring it from skill lesson-learning to application in reading a selection.

Although most research on the value of direct teaching has involved reading comprehension skills, the approach gives equal promise of success in developing decoding skills and study skills as well.

Vocabulary development

Another group of research studies with major implications for reading growth deals with vocabulary. We may think of a student as having a meaning, or listening, vocabulary; a speaking vocabulary; a reading vocabulary; and a writing vocabulary. Some words are in all four, as when a child has meaning for a word when it is heard, uses it in speaking to others, recognizes it when it is read, and uses it in writing. Some words may be at only one level, as when a child has meaning for a word when it is heard, but does not use it in speaking or writing and would not recognize that word in print.

Meaning vocabulary is the underlying basis for all four. A child will not comprehend a word during reading or use it correctly in speaking and writing unless there is meaning for that word.

What is research telling us about teaching meaning vocabulary? Reports by Blachowicz (1985), Beck (1982), and at least thirty others recently published suggest three potential outcomes from teaching meaning vocabulary: (1) students who are taught the meanings for words can acquire and retain those meanings, (2) students who are taught the meanings for potentially unfamiliar words before they read a selection containing those words will have greater comprehension of the selection, and (3) teaching meaning vocabulary can result in greater general reading achievement.

But before concluding that we have found the sweet elixir or the magic pill leading to instant reading success, there are three caveats suggest-

ing that it is not really that easy. First, words taught should be key words that are important to general comprehension. When teaching word meanings, the teacher must select words that have a likelihood of appearing in a variety of reading situations.

Second, meanings should be taught in ways that promote semantic relationships rather than in isolation. Teaching meanings for words in larger, language context holds greater promise of success than teaching meanings in isolation.

Third, the development of meaning vocabulary should be a sequential, planned, long-term process. The I'll-teach-it-next-Tuesday-if-there's-time approach will do little or nothing to enhance reading abilities, but a carefully organized, longitudinal program of vocabulary development can help lead to reading growth.

As well-thought-out programs of developing meaning vocabulary become even more widespread in our classrooms, student reading achievement will develop still more.

Schemata

The importance of schema, or general background knowledge relating to a selection to be read, has been well established in the literature (Langer, 1984; Tierney & Pearson, 1981). It may be true, as Pikulski (1986) notes, that less attention is being given to schema theory now than earlier because educators have a propensity for new ideas or new jargon. Before we move on to new cutting edges in teaching reading, however, let us be sure that we have truly incorporated what we know about schema into our everyday teaching. Research suggests several practical applications.

First, although a reader's schema has an important influence on the meaning developed from reading a passage, in the classroom the teacher should consciously activate that schema in order to enhance meaning. This means, of course, that we never have students begin reading a selection in a basal reader or in a content area textbook without first discussing with them what they already know about concepts related to that selection.

Second, since some students may not possess adequate schemata before reading, discussing what they already know may not be sufficient — they do not have enough background. This means that, in addition to activating concepts through discussion, we should also help develop key concepts for those students who do not have them.

Third, students may have some inaccurate background knowledge relating to the content of a selection and activating that incorrect information is of no help in developing meaning. In order to enhance comprehension of the selection, students should first develop correct concepts.

The research evidence dealing with schemata is quite clear in pointing to teaching activities that will help students develop meaning as they read an assigned selection: the teacher must activate students' schemata through discussion before they read and, where background information is inadequate or incorrect, help them develop appropriate background information.

Inferencing

Making inferences, or understanding something that the author expects us to understand although it has not been explicitly stated, has also received attention in recent research.

This research has affirmed the common sense notion that inferences come from two different sources of information: the information that the author gives us directly and the information that we already bring to the printed page (McIntosh, 1985). If you read, "Mary sobbed uncontrollably," you would infer that Mary was unhappy. You could make this inference because the author tells you how Mary was behaving and your own background information tells you that someone who acts that way is probably unhappy.

The research also suggests what teachers should do to help students become better at inferencing as they read (Hansen, 1981; Holmes, 1983). First, students should be directly taught how to make inferences; that is, they should be taught that they will understand what they read more fully when they actively interrelate what they already know with what the author tells them.

Second, the kinds of questions that we ask students about materials they have read tend to condition them to read for the purposes represented by those questions. If we stress literal questions, students tend to become better at reading for literal understanding but not at reading for other purposes. Consequently, in order to improve students' abilities to make inferences, we should provide them with healthy doses of discussion questions that require them to make inferences.

Neither of these should be used to the exclusion of the other. Teachers should use the direct teaching steps to teach students how to make in-

ferences and also follow-up readings with discussion questions that stress inferencing.

Conclusion

No teacher is likely to believe that we have reached an educational nirvana in teaching reading, but neither should we willingly accept the criticisms that are based on inaccurate or incomplete data. The preponderence of evidence is that we have been helping students become better readers and that we are continuing to do so today.

As a result of recent research on improving reading abilities, tomorrow holds even greater promise. As research on direct teaching, vocabulary development, schemata, inferencing, and other areas becomes even more widely translated into everyday teaching practices, reading achievement will grow still more.

We are neither as professionally bad as some people say we are nor as good as we will soon become.

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Achtung!

Bitte vermerken Sie den 1.-3. Oktober auf Ihrem Kalender, so dass Sie nicht vergessen am OCTOBERFEST 87 in Indianapolis teilzunehmen. Es wird die grösste Lesekonferenz sein, die jemals in Indiana abgehalten wurde und wird Hoosier Hospitalität bieten, professionelle Versammlungen, Ausstellungen, und viele andere spezielle Ereignisse.

Pässe und Preise werden zur Verfügung gestellt für diejenigen, die an mehreren Teilen des Programmes an allen drei Tagen teilnehmen. OCTOBERFEST 87 ist etwas so Spezielles, dass Sie sich Ihre Teilnahme versichern möchten und umgehend Pläne machen, dieses Fest zu besuchen. Sie sind herzlich willkommen!

Please put October 1-3, 1987, on your calendar so you will remember to attend Octoberfest '87 in Indianapolis. This will be the largest reading conference ever held in Indiana and will feature Hoosier hospitality, professional meetings, exhibits, and many special events.

Passports and prizes will be available to those who attend various parts of the program for all three days. Octoberfest will be so special that you won't want to miss it. Please plan to be with us. You are welcome!

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